

# MAGNOLIA

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## Proposal would tear up Miss. roads, bridges



### Your Turn

Dick Hall

Guest columnist

Prosperity rides on good roads. The first question a new industry asks when evaluating potential location sites, is, "how do I get raw materials in and how do I get finished products out."

That brings me to why I wrote this piece. Congress has debated for years whether to increase the weight and lengths of tractor-trailer trucks on our Interstates, which would impact roads across Mississippi and the nation. They are lobbying for longer double-trailer trucks — sometimes called "Double 33s" — and heavier single trailer trucks.

I served 24 years in the Mississippi Legislature, both as a state representative and state senator. For the last 19

years, I have served as the Central District Transportation Commissioner for the State of Mississippi. As commissioner, I have made it my priority to make sure that Mississippi tax dollars are spent efficiently to build and maintain the safest roads and bridges, and do it on time and on budget.

I have opposed these increases in truck size and weight in the past and I will continue to do so. Do you want to have to drive next to longer double-trailer trucks that are 91 feet in length? I certainly don't. Nor do I want my family flanked by longer doubles.

Roads and bridges in our state are in terrible condition. Gov. Bryant recently ordered the closing of over 100 bridges in the state because they are not safe. Adding longer and heavier tractor-trailer trucks to them, when we know they cannot handle the weight of the trucks that travel them currently, would be a

formula for disaster.

When I tell you that over a 1,000 deficient bridges in this state need to be seriously repaired or replaced at a cost of some \$2.5 billion, and that almost 5,000 lane miles of highway need serious repair and reconstruction costing a billion dollars, do you think that we're lying? Or do you just not care? How can you possibly pretend that nothing needs to be done?

There are three bridges on U.S. 51 that were built in 1929. My dad graduated in engineering from Mississippi A&M at that time and he would tell you that those bridges were designed for a maximum life of 50 years. We may possibly have a chance to begin replacing those bridges in 2019 when they will be 90 years old. And that's on a U.S. highway.

We live in a mostly rural state, with many of us living off city or county streets and roads. Longer double-trailer

trucks will pose an even greater danger of increasing severe crashes as they enter and exit highways and also travel on local roads with narrow lanes, limited sight distances, small shoulders and trees and telephone poles at the edge line.

Those supporting this dangerous change say it will improve safety because it will result in fewer trucks on the roads. But we all know in a business where the bottom line trumps everything that will not be the case. There will simply be longer and heavier trucks on our deteriorating infrastructure, and more of them.

As I continue working to keep our motorist safe on the roadways, as well as grow our economy, we simply cannot afford bigger, longer or heavier trucks, in Mississippi.

*Dick Hall is chairman of the Mississippi Transportation Commission.*

# MAGNOLIA

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MERIDIAN STAR

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## Angry officials squabble over troubled bridges

JACKSON — Mississippi has a problem: deteriorating local bridges. People could work together to seek a solution. All too often, though, it seems they'd rather fight.

The anger boiling among some county supervisors has now produced a lawsuit by Smith and Jasper counties against Republican Gov. Phil Bryant, claiming he overstepped his legal power when he declared a state of emergency and ordered counties to close bridges that federally backed inspectors judged unsafe.

Bryant's action in April followed a year and a half of escalating pressure from federal officials and mounting resentment from county supervisors and engineers.

This whole drama started back in late 2016, when the Federal Highway Administration decided it wanted to take a closer look at low-rated bridges in Mississippi.



JEFF AMY

syndicated columnist

The agency's assistant division administrator, Don Davis, told county supervisors at a meeting in January that a federal review found Mississippi had more low-rated bridges still open and carrying traffic than any other state. Federal officials ordered inspections of the 120 lowest-rated bridges. Of the first six they looked at, federal officials concluded four were unsafe and needed to be closed. Local governments were leaving 114 of the 120 bridges open, but federal officials concluded 65 of those bridges needed to be closed.

This is where everything went bad.

The feds concluded that counties and cities were leaving unsafe bridges open, and that the Office of State Aid Road Construction wasn't effectively policing those local decisions. The feds ordered lots more inspections, first finding 89 of another 139 low-rated bridges unsafe, and then ordering the state to inspect all 2,200 bridges that have timber pilings underneath.

"We had no choice but to conclude that unsafe bridges are not being closed," Davis said.

Since it doesn't have much influence over State Aid, the Federal Highway Administra-

unsafe, and then ordering the state to inspect all 2,200 bridges that have timber pilings underneath.

"We had no choice but to conclude that unsafe bridges are not being closed," Davis said.

Since it doesn't have much influence over State Aid, the Federal Highway Administration issued an ultimatum to the Mississippi Department of Transportation, threatening its federal funding if the department didn't make its separately controlled little brother comply.

The department did so, creating an inspection program costing tens of millions. That hacked off supervisors, especially because it came from transportation money they said could have been used to repair bridges.

"Why did y'all let a \$32 million contract when you could have given that \$32 million to the counties?" Smith County Supervisor Dwight Norris asked in the January meeting. "A lot of these bridges can be repaired for less than \$14,000."

Counties might fix all the bridges if they had plenty of money, but supervisors are trying to avoid hiking property taxes on local voters. Lawmakers agreed to borrow \$50 million this year to help, but after skipping the regular \$20 million payment during the 2017 budget, that's only \$10 million more than normal. The closures are certainly hardships. The state bridge database shows one bridge closed in Jasper County created a 13-mile detour. Another bridge closed there carried 1,400 vehicles per day.

Not all bridges are staying closed. Cities and counties are repairing and reopening some, although they may still be posted to prohibit heavy vehicles. But a number of counties never accepted the inspection results. They refused to close bridges, forcing Bryant and state transportation officials to do it for them.

"The county bridges are routinely inspected by public and private engineers for these counties who have not deemed these bridges to be a hazard to the motoring public within these counties," lawyers for Smith and Jasper counties said when they filed the lawsuit.

In effect, they're saying leave the counties alone and let them go back to how they've been doing things. Meanwhile, as counties fight with state and federal officials, drivers might want to beware.

*Jeff Amy has covered politics and government for The Associated Press in Mississippi since 2011.*



## Bridge closures concern supervisors

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**BY BRANT SAPPINGTON**

boonevilleeditor@bellsouth.net

Prentiss County Supervisors are expressing frustration over costly bridge inspections and the large number of bridges being closed in the county and across the state.

The county has seen several bridges closed due to them failing inspections. The inspections were man-

dated by the Federal Highway Administration which forced the Mississippi Department of Transportation to push the Office of State Aid Road Construction to begin an intensive inspection program of all bridges in the state.

The contract for the program was awarded to an out of state contractor for \$32 million.

Prentiss County Fourth District Supervisor Mike Huddleston said that money represents funds that could have been provided to counties to repair bridges and make other needed improvements. He said it now costs approximately \$14,000 for each bridge inspection under the new program, up from around \$300 previously.

Huddleston explained the county must pay for the inspection and for a followup inspection once repairs are completed.

Third District Supervisor Mike Kesler said the end result of the situation is fewer bridges being repaired due to a lack of state funding.

He said the closures are a

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## BRIDGES

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significant hardship for many and impact the ability of school buses to reach students and law enforcement and other first responders to respond to emergency situations.

In other business during Monday's regular board meeting, the board:

- approved the appointment of Jennifer Reece to the Prentiss County Agri-Center

Board. Reece will fill the post vacated by Kevin Gates who resigned after being appointed director of the agri-center.

- approved the hiring of Johnny Miller as a Deputy Tax Assessor.

- noted the regular mid-month board meeting will be held next Monday, May 14 at 10 a.m. The meeting was moved from its normal third Wednesday date due to a scheduling conflict.





## City talks clean up, job fair at board meeting

by Anna Coates

Hazlehurst Mayor Shirley Sandifer and all five Aldermen - Frank Jones (Ward 1), Ron Sims (Ward 2), Frederick Sandifer (Ward 3), Jeremy McKinzie (Ward 4) and Rick Akin (Ward 5) - met in regular session May 1 at City Hall at 6:00 p.m. After proclaiming May "Safe Digging Month - Call 811", the board

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## City board discusses clean up — Continued from Page 1

took under advisement local insurance agent Jerald Delaney's Risk Management plan for Hazlehurst, similar to one already in place with Copiah County Board of Supervisors.

Agenda items approved by the board included the following:

- Chris Pendleton, Fire Chief - hire Dylan Berch as full-time fireman and amend FY18 budget to cover transmission repair of \$14,800; permission to apply for a Walmart Community Grant to purchase tasers;

- Byron Swilley, Police Chief - approve his attendance at Mississippi Chiefs Conference and Municipal Court Clerk Bridget Evans' attendance at annual Municipal Court Clerk training; accept resignation of Sonya Benson, dispatcher, with regret and appoint Shanara Kerr as full-time dispatcher;
- Hire summer workers; Hire Candarry Duckworth as part-time substitute custodian
- Approve request of Roshunda Davis to

hold the second annual Walk for Lupus May 12 @ 8 a.m.

Dr. Marvin Hogan, Executive Director of Friends of Children of Mississippi briefed the Board about a new program called Two Generations, and highlighted some of the successes of the 38 years the organization has been operating in Copiah.

Representatives of Gamma Phi Delta Sorority, Inc. invited city officials to the chartering of the sorority at Antioch MB Church on May 12 at 1:00 p.m.

Kenneth Cleveland, CEO of Universal Solar Enterprises, and Lynn Shelton, analyst with the firm, discussed their proposal to install solar panels on City Hall to reduce energy bills. A lengthy explanation and ensuing questions resulted in the Board taking the matter under advisement.

Mayor Sandifer reminded those present of the May 19 event at Lake Hazle from 8:30 a.m. -12:30 p.m. Each year Keep Mississippi Beautiful has a statewide kickoff for the Great American Cleanup in one of its affiliated communities. This year they chose the Keep Copiah County Beautiful Chapter and selected Lake Hazle to improve. Volun-

teers will spruce up the Lake by planting trees, shrubs and flowers; clean up public spaces by picking up litter and debris; and improve the walking trail. Lunch will be provided by local vendors. Statewide officials of Keep Mississippi Beautiful, including Hazlehurst native Sarah Guynes Kountouris, will have a short kickoff ceremony at the Lake Hazle pier at 8:30. Sarah is past director of Keep Mississippi Beautiful and now chair of Mississippi Recycling Coalition. Mayor Sandifer noted there is something for everyone to do, even those who can't dig or plant. "We want to show our hospitality, and I urge you to attend and support this event, the Mayor said.

Other events in the hopper include a "No Menthol Sunday" on May 27, at which local pastors are to emphasize healthy habits, including stopping smoking as part of the ongoing effort to certify Hazlehurst's public spaces as tobacco free.

A Job Fair for displaced Advanced Auto workers will occur on May 18. Volunteers are asked to help applicants prepare resumes and provide other help as needed.

At the close of the meeting Fire Chief

Chris Pendleton brought in one of the local firemen who modeled the new turnout gear received that day. "We really needed this gear," Chief stated. Four complete sets were received, with more to be ordered next FY.

Mayor Sandifer an-

nounced a Board Work Session for May 8 at 6:00 p.m. at City Hall. After approving claims of \$212,100.91, the meeting adjourned. Next regular meeting is June 5. The public is welcome at both sessions.



**GREAT FAMILY** — Dr. Ronnie Nettles, President of Co-Lin Community College, enjoyed having his family with him during his retirement reception at the Thames Center at on campus last Thursday. From left are his son, Landon, his wife, Rosie, his daughter, Jordan, and Dr. Nettles.





## Captain D's could begin construction soon

By REGGIE ROSS

Staff Writer

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Folks in Grenada are continuing to tap their feet waiting on the arrival of Captain D's, and now it appears the ball is beginning to roll.

The McBrayer Brothers, Captain D's chain owners in West Point and Starkville, met with Grenada City Manager Trey Baker this week and discussed their plans to build.

"I was shown the plans for the building," Baker said. "The brothers have been meeting with the

MDOT (Mississippi Department of Transportation) about safety precautions with them being right along Highway 8."

The Captain D's home in Grenada will be on Sunset Drive in front of the Save-A-Lot/Auto Zone shopping center. The restaurant will sit where the old Sunset Car Wash was demolished last year.

Keith McBrayer, one of the three brothers, told the *GrenadaStar* in December that plans were coming around and they were coming to Grenada.

"We've looked at that market in Grenada and we realized that there wasn't a place like Captain D's there," McBrayer said.

Baker said the McBrayer brothers have been working at a steady pace to get the restaurant here.

"They've been working really hard to get a Captain D's on the scene here," Baker said. "They've jumped a lot of hurdles because they know what we have here. It's just that they have a lot of inter working that goes

Captain D's, A-5

## Captain D's

From Page One

with this process."

In 2014, the McBrayer brothers opened the West Point restaurant in a new beach-style design.

Population-wise West Point has only 2,000 people less than Grenada, but the restaurant there was the first Captain D's in the state of Mississippi to be built with a new costal theme that resembles a beachside destination.

The "Beach Design" includes the menu boards, new dinnerware, and a newly reformulated equipment line.

"We always wanted to build a Captain D's and a few years ago we bought a franchise," McBrayer said. "Now we've set our sights on Grenada, a great town that we're very familiar with."

The McBrayer brothers own an acre of that and will likely do additional landscaping for space.

McBrayer said once completed, the restaurant will seat 80 to 82 people and will consist of about 25 employees.

Headquartered in Nashville, Captain D's operates and franchises 520 restaurants in 25 states.

Captain D's is a fast casual restaurant, specializing in seafood and fish and chips. The restaurant also features a menu of grilled items. The first Captain D's restaurant opened in Donelson, Tenn in 1969.

# MAGNOLIA

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### Your Turn

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214  
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years, I have served as the Central District Transportation Commissioner for the State of Mississippi. As commissioner, I have made it my priority to make sure that Mississippi tax dollars are spent efficiently to build and maintain the safest roads and bridges, and do it on time and on budget.

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*Dick Hall is chairman of the Mississippi Transportation Commission.*



# Safe Streets operation nets 70 arrests

## ◆ Tunica Sheriff's Office, agencies conduct round up

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

The Tunica County Sheriff's Office conducted a Special Enforcement Detail known as "Tunica County Safe Streets Operation" on Thursday, April 26, Friday, April 27, and Saturday, April 28, 2018.

Assisting Tunica County Sheriff K.C. Hamp, Sr.'s department in the Safe Streets Operation were the Mississippi Highway Safety Patrol, the Mississippi Department of Corrections, Mississippi Department of Transportation, Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics, Mississippi Office of Homeland Security, U.S. Marshals Service, the Tunica Police Department, and Sheriff's Offices from Bolivar, Coahoma, DeSoto, Panola and Quitman counties.

"This type of law enforcement will continue in Tunica County, to further reduce criminal activity,"

Hamp said. "Our citizens demand and deserve safe streets and neighborhoods for their children."

Hamp added that one of his goals is to continue to foster working partnerships with city, county, state and federal law enforcement agencies, which he describes as essential to public safety.

"Safe Streets" focused on impaired driving checkpoints for such offenses as driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, driving without a valid license, driving on a suspended license, drug related activity, no proof of insurance, tractor/trailer violations, and firearms violations. The operations also developed intelligence on drug and gang activities and on serving felony and misdemeanor warrants.

The three-day operation recovered 11 weapons, three of which had been reported stolen from Coahoma and Copiah counties and from Salem, Oregon. Officers arrested and charged three individuals with carrying a concealed weapon.

During the Safe Streets operation, a total of 70 arrests

were made for charges ranging from aggravated assault, felony and other possession of marijuana, theft of property, child support violations, domestic violence, parole violations, simple assault, failure to appear, contempt of court, driving while license suspended, and driving without a license.

Officers arrested and charged 10 people with possession of a controlled substance, and one was arrested and charged for possession of a controlled substance with intent to sell. Officers also recovered several hundred dollars of counterfeit currency and arrested and charged one person with possession of counterfeit currency.

Special Enforcement Detail officers also issued a total of 361 traffic citations for offenses ranging from careless driving, expired tags and improper equipment to failure to yield, running a red light or stop sign, reckless driving, speeding and tag light violations.

The Tunica County Sheriff's Office believes that after certain information obtained and

recovered during the Safe Streets operation is processed by the Mississippi Crime Lab, additional indictments and arrests will be made.

Sheriff Hamp thanked all city, county, state and federal law enforcement agencies who partnered with the Tunica County Sheriff's Office during the Safe Streets operation.

"We encourage all members of our community to assist local law enforcement in the fight against crime by using the anonymous and confidential mechanism of the Tunica County Crime Stoppers Hot Line, 662-910-0400. The Crime Stoppers organization is a very important part of our strategy to combat crime in Tunica County," added Hamp. "The Tunica County Sheriff's Office applauds the Crime Stoppers organization for the good work they perform."

Tips provided to law enforcement protects the community from incidents that could be a great risk to public health and safety, as well as removing guns and drugs from community streets.



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## TOURISM

# Travel and Tourism Week offers chance to navigate the state

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Press reports

JACKSON – The Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) is joining the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) and Visit Mississippi to recognize May 6–12 as National Travel and Tourism Week. During this week, MDOT encourages all Mississippians to get out and see all the state has to offer.

MDA and Visit Mississippi will be holding events at welcome centers and in local communities throughout the state during the week. MDOT encourages all Mississippians to get out and navigate the state. Explore the Windsor Ruins in Port Gibson. Connect with “The King” at Elvis’ birthplace in Tupelo. Dine your way through the Mississippi Seafood Trail on the Gulf Coast.

“Many of our estimated 23.15 million visitors arrive on Mississippi’s roads and highways,” said Visit Mississippi Director Craig Ray. “We encourage visitors to get out and explore our state’s incredible attractions and culture.”

Travel and tourism are vital to Mississippi’s economy. In 2016, there were approximately 87,000 jobs travel and tourism-related jobs. Additionally, travel and tourism generated approximately \$6.3 billion in 2017.

“As you get out and explore some of Mississippi’s

unique travel destinations, MDOT has free resources available to help you get where you’re going faster and safer,” said Melinda McGrath, P.E., MDOT executive director.

MDOTtraffic.com is a great tool to get any road trip started with. With live camera feeds from across the state, drivers can check the traffic before hitting the road. MDOTtraffic.com also has alerts for construction zones, closed roads, weather-related events and incident alerts. The map even shows the locations of rest areas and welcome centers throughout the state. The public can create a free account and customize MDOTtraffic.com to how you travel.

The MDOT Traffic app is available free in the App Store and Google Play store, and serves as a companion to MDOTtraffic.com. The app, just like the website, has access to real-time traffic alert information and cameras across the state. The app will synchronize with your account on MDOTtraffic.com and only send you alerts on your preferred driving routes. The app will send you alerts in a text message, email or push notification.

A common sight on Mississippi roads, particularly as we move toward the heart of summer, is highway construction. As you navigate the state, MDOT warns motorists to be

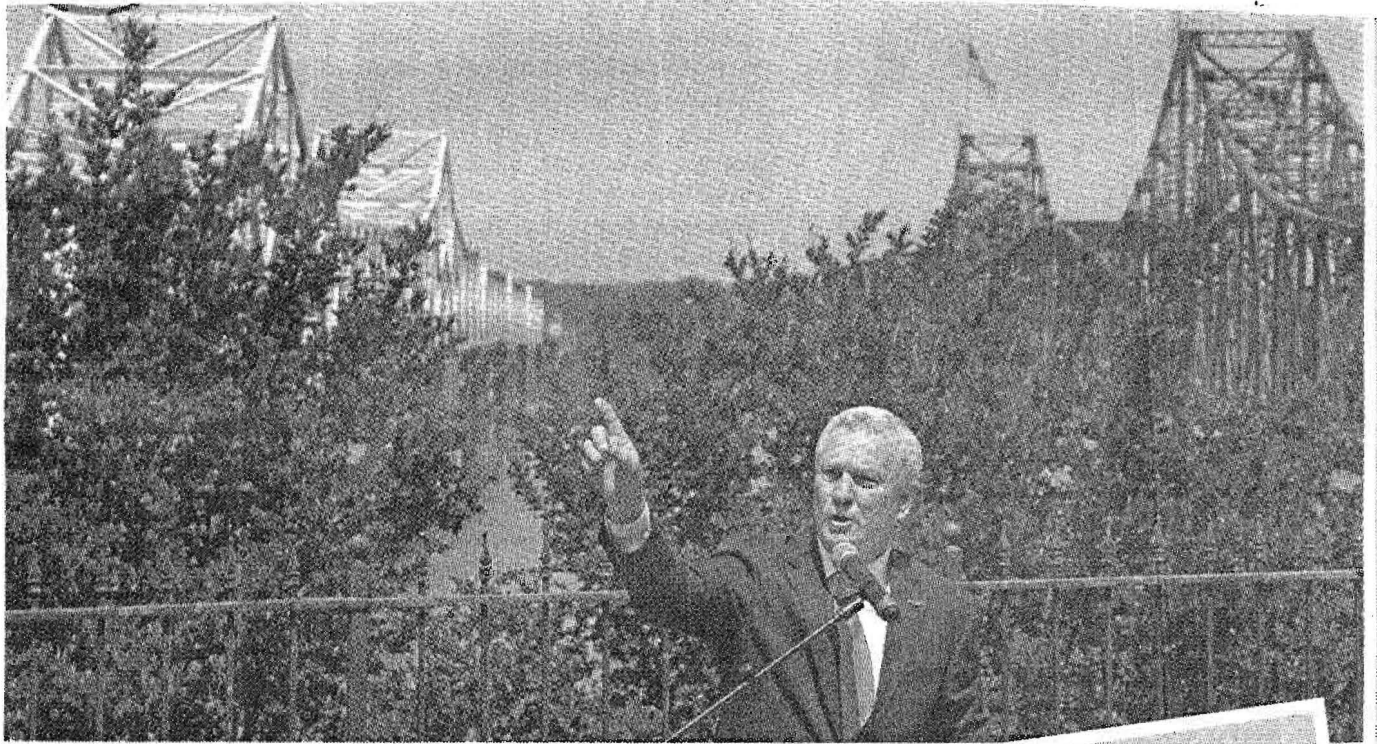
aware of these work zones.

Highway work zones can present unfamiliar traffic patterns. In addition to understanding how to navigate highway work zones safely, motorists can help protect highway workers by avoiding distracted driving and obeying all advance warning and posted speed limit signs. Examples of common work zones found on Mississippi highways and a complete list of tips can be found at GoMDOT.com/drivesmartms.

Regardless of the amount of training, how well a work zone is set up or the amount of advance warning, MDOT maintenance crews have no control over how vehicles move through work zones.

“MDOT wants everyone to see the beauty that Mississippi has,” McGrath said. “We also want you to get there safely and to help keep our highway workers safe, so plan your route and check all these resources out before set out on your trip.”

Established by a congressional resolution in 1983, National Travel and Tourism Week serves to champion the power of the industry. Travel is a \$2.4 trillion industry in the U.S., with \$990 billion in direct travel-related spending by domestic and international visitors in 2017. Additionally, travel supports 15.6 million American jobs – about 8.8 million direct travel jobs and another 6.8 million indirect jobs.



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PHOTOS BY COURTLAND WELLS • THE VICKSBURG POST

**TOURISM WEEK:** Mississippi Development Authority Executive Director, Glenn McCullough, Jr. (above) speaks during the Visit Mississippi National Tourism Week Press Conference at the Mississippi Welcome Center Wednesday. He was joined by musician Steve Azar, Mississippi Department of Transportation Commissioner Mike Taggart and Vicksburg Mayor George Flaggs Jr.

# Celebrating tourism

## Flaggs: Vicksburg 'economy is centered around tourism'

By John Surratt  
*The Vicksburg Post*

Vicksburg's economic health relies heavily on the tourism industry, Mayor George Flaggs Jr. said Wednesday.

"Our whole economy is centered around our tourism," he said. "We understand tourism in Vicksburg. We understand how it is to be able to

showcase a city with so much history and so much value to the tourism of this state and the tourism of this nation."

Flaggs' comments came as he addressed state and local officials, visitors and local residents at a reception and press conference in observance of National Travel & Tourism





Week. At the Vicksburg Welcome Center on Washington Street.

Locally, Flagg said, the city's restaurant tax raises about \$912,000 a year, while the city's hotel tax averages about \$798,000 year for an annual total of \$1.7 million. The VCVB's 1 percent tax on restaurants and hotels, he said, raises \$1.178 million for the agency.

"The visitors' expenditure is over \$2.4 million," he said, adding tourism accounts for 3,925 direct jobs, or 19.2 percent of the work force in Warren County.

"Over \$22.5 million in state and local taxes are the result of travel and tourism in Warren County, and 89,300 visitors check into our visitor center every year."

Flaggs highlighted the Vicksburg National Military Park, which he said is visited by 436,000 people annually, and commended former Sen. Thad Cochran for getting \$5.9 million in the federal

Omnibus Budget Act for repairs to the slide area at the park's Texas Memorial.

The park, he said, is being linked with the state's Grand Gulf State Park and the Champion Hill and Raymond Battlefield sites to give visitors a better understanding of the Siege of Vicksburg.

"What that says to us is that those people who were spending eight hours a day in our park now will have to spend a day and a half in Vicksburg to get the whole theme of our legendary park," he said.

Flaggs said more tour boats are landing in Vicksburg, adding 100 boats docked here in 2017, and 125 boats are expected to visit the city in 2018.

"We have people from all 50 states joining in our military park and the city of Vicksburg. We have about 25 (foreign) countries represented each year to come to see the historic city of Vicksburg and to see Mississippi."

Flaggs also put in a plug for opening the old U.S. 80 bridge to foot and bicy-

cle traffic.

"I want you to know you are standing on the banks of the Mississippi and standing on the future of this (U.S. 80) bridge being open where we can enjoy (the river) like we never had before," a comment that drew applause and cheers from the local residents and officials at the reception.

Glenn McCullough, executive director of the Mississippi Development Agency, highlighted the state's benefits from tourism, pointing out 23.15 million people visited the state in 2017, an increase of 450,000 people. Many of those were from other countries, and tourists spent a total of \$6.34 billion in the state, he said.

Tourism in the state, he said, accounted for 87,335 in direct jobs and \$3 billion in income for workers involved in tourism. The travel industry, he said, contributed \$398 million to the state's general fund.

"We have a state that is so rich in culture, that is so rich in history, that is so rich in beauty, that is so rich in people," he said.

# MAGNOLIA

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ENTERPRISE-JOURNAL

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## Lawmakers missed fuel tax chance

214 For several years, many people, including members of Mississippi's Transportation Commission, have been encouraging state lawmakers to significantly raise the fuel tax to pay for maintenance of highways, roads and bridges.

That encouragement has fallen on largely deaf ears in the Republican-dominated Legislature, which is loathe to raise any tax, no matter how sensible the increase would be.

In the summer of 2015, when gas prices were running about \$2 a gallon, the time was opportune to raise a tax that had not been adjusted since 1987. Motorists would have hardly noticed, since prices at the pump were the lowest they had been in six years, and even longer if adjusted for inflation.

Now, the Legislature has squandered that opportunity. Gas prices are moving back upward, with the national average having risen about 40 cents a gallon in the past year. It is now edging closer to the \$3 mark than the \$2 level of three years ago.

The gas tax still needs to be raised — at least doubling the current 18.4 cents a gallon just to come close to catching up to inflation over the past 31 years. But lawmakers have made it politically harder by not doing something they should have done years ago.

*Tim Kalich, Greenwood Commonwealth*



## Opinion

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# Gas tax should be indexed for inflation

When the state legislature voted 30 years ago to vastly improve Mississippi's highways, they passed an 18 cent gas tax. It was the most logical way to fund the program.

As a result, Mississippi has had some of the best roads in the nation, a boon for economic development and public safety and convenience.

But the legislature made one fatal flaw: They didn't index the tax for inflation. After 30 years, inflation has cut the real amount of the original gas tax in half.

At 18.4 cents per gallon, Mississippi has the lowest gas tax of any of our neighboring states and the 46th lowest in the nation, according to the Tax Foundation. Pennsylvania, with the nation's highest gas tax, levies 58 cents per gallon.

As our roads deteriorate, the crisis is coming to a head. Earlier this year, the federal government shut down 100 bridges. Now the feds are threatening to cut off money to Mississippi if something is not done.

Gov. Phil Bryant has proposed a lottery. That's a terrible idea. Lotteries hurt low income households that can least afford it. It's state-supported gambling, a moral abomination.

Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves proposed a bandaid approach that would not even come close to the \$350 million needed. His plan would take authority away from the Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) and give power to the governor, a position Reeves hopes to fill.

Now Speaker of the House Philip Gunn has made a proposal to raise the gas tax two cents, not nearly enough, and then reallocate existing use tax money to the MDOT. He simultaneously plans to eliminate the lowest bracket of the state income tax so he can claim he did not raise overall taxes.

All three major state leaders are bending over backwards not to raise taxes, but there is simply no way to properly maintain our roads without doing so.

The federal government has no room to point fingers. The federal gas tax hasn't been adjusted for inflation in 23 years. The federal interstate system is also crumbling as a result.

The real problem here is a fundamental flaw in democracy. Voters don't want to raise taxes and will boot out politicians who do. Politicians don't want to get booted out, so they kick the can down the road.

But roads are apolitical. They will

### Guest Column

BY  
Wyatt Emmerich



deteriorate regardless of which way the political winds may blow. It's just a matter of time.

The nature of road maintenance compounds this problem. Roads can last for many years without maintenance, making it easy for politicians to kick the can down the road. But sooner or later, the lack of maintenance becomes obvious.

By that time, it's too late. An expensive proposition becomes an enormous deferred liability. A road, if maintained properly, can last for 30 years and be rebuilt for a reasonable cost. But rebuilding a road that hasn't been maintained can cost three or more times more money – a veritable disaster. And that's where we are.

Voters, who generally detest taxes, think the roads are just fine until they collapse, causing motorists to pay huge amounts to repair tires, rims, shocks, struts and, ultimately, a total front end rebuilt costing thousands. At that point, the proverbial material has hit the fan.

Republicans often like to extoll the free market and compare its benefits to the governmental tax-and-spend model. But in the free market, this sad situation would never occur.

Companies that fail to maintain their assets fail. Customers turn away in droves. Just imagine a hotel that allowed its infrastructure to crumble. Customers would flock to the new nice hotel.

Airlines must maintain their airplanes, otherwise accidents occur and nobody would buy their tickets.

My newspaper company over the years has been forced to spend millions to maintain our printing equipment. Nobody will read an ugly, inky paper. It's not money I wanted to spend. I had to do it. The free market made me.

Any homeowner knows this. You can fail to maintain your roof, but if you do your home value will decline and you could never sell your house. You would also risk further structural damage caused by moisture. So you suck it up and maintain your roof.

These free market forces unfortunately do

not work with road maintenance. Politicians come and go and can leave the problem for the next office holder. Motorists have few options. They can take another route, but that adds time and time is money. And sooner or later all the roads on all the routes will go bad.

Now we have a crisis. For the state of Mississippi, bridge closures and angry voters are a reality. Now the loss of federal funds adds fuel to the fire.

My job is to explain what's going on in the hope of turning the tide of public opinion which will eventually manifest itself at the ballot box. Change will happen, but at a rate that will make the price tag billions more than would have been necessary if we had state leaders instead of state politicians.

Mississippi's one-party domination doesn't help matters. Politicians follow the standard play book, which means never raise taxes under any circumstance. You can't run a state that way.

Anti-tax political groups don't help matters. There are some very powerful political action committees and political non-profit organizations that will hurt politicians who raise taxes. No politician wants to get on the wrong side of those people.

I have always disliked ideology because it is often taken to extreme. You simply cannot properly run the government if you take the position that taxes can never be raised under any circumstances. It just won't work.

No doubt government is wasteful and spends too much. It has always been so. That is the nature of the beast. That's why I prefer free market solutions. Perhaps we are headed to a system of toll roads run by for-profit businesses. Now that would truly be an enormous expense.

Throughout this debate, nobody has disputed the maintenance needs specified by MDOT. It is what it is. Road maintenance costs are fairly straightforward to compute.

The simplest solution is to index the gas tax and get it to a point so we can properly maintain our roads to minimize the long-range cost. But that would require our state leaders to get off the no-tax-increase-under-any-circumstance ideological rocking horse. I see no sign of that happening.

As Winston Churchill once said: Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others. We are seeing the truth of those words.





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# ...to open



Robert Long/DTT

Northern District Transportation Commissioner Mike Tagert speaks with media about the timetable for the opening of the new I-269 Corridor in addition to a demonstration of drone technology used in bridge and road inspection.

## Target date of Sept. 20 part of fall completion window

BY ROBERT LEE LONG  
COMMUNITY EDITOR

Interstate 269, the nation's newest transportation corridor, is expected to open this fall — specifically during the time frame of September through November with a targeted date of Sept. 20 eyed by MDOT officials.

"It would be great if we could do it on Sept. 20 — that's the 68th anniversary of the completion of Interstate 55 through DeSoto County," Northern District Transportation Commissioner Mike Tagert told news media gathered on a paved portion of the super highway.

The time schedule marks the first time that the Mississippi Department of Transportation has been that specific on a date for opening of I-269 which con-

**'It would be great if we could do it on Sept. 20 — that's the 68th anniversary of the completion of Interstate 55 through DeSoto County.'**

**Mike Tagert, Transportation Commissioner**

nects I-69 from Tunica to Hwy. 385 near Collierville.

Tagert held a press conference on the shoulder of the unfinished I-269 to unveil one of MDOT's newest inspection tools, a state-of-the-art drone which is being used to inspect hundreds of miles of

roadway and bridges, including I-269.

Tagert said use of the ten-pound drone, which on a windy Wednesday was able to withstand a strong headwind without crashing to the ground — thanks to on board computer-controlled stabilizers — helps protect the lives of MDOT employees tasked with inspecting many of the state's most dangerous bridges and roadways in need of repair.

"These things save us a tremendous amount of money," Tagert said. "This is the future from a bridge inspection standpoint. It's much safer than putting an employee out there."

Tagert said MDOT has aerial drone footage of the entire length of I-269, along with footage of miles and miles of road-

SEE I-269, P2

## I-269: Just a 'drone' kind of day

way and bridges. The drones can fly as high as 400 feet above ground level.

"It demonstrates the quality of the technology that we have," Tagert said.

The retired U.S. Marine said drones are also useful in surveying damage to infrastructure in the wake of tornadoes and hurricanes and that information can be shared and coordinated with emergency first responders.

Tagert said drones have more practical applications as well.

"In Panola County, drone footage may be used to illustrate road realignment over the Tallahatchie River as part of a bridge replacement project," Tagert said. "Speaking of bridges, in Tate County, drone footage helped diagnose flood damage at the Interstate 55 Hickahala Creek Bridge. The drone data showed a significant scour hole that was repaired and kept the bridge stable and safe to the traveling public."

Other uses include inventory management of road signs, roadway

striping and other highway infrastructure. During times of traffic congestion, drone footage helps address traffic flow and possible alternate routes.

The drone aircraft have a three-mile operating range and images are 20 megapixel in clarity.

"Drones are a very cost effective tool," Tagert said.

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Robert Long/DTT

Northern District Transportation Commissioner Mike Tagert gives a press conference on the soon-to-be-completed Interstate 269 corridor through DeSoto County as a drone hovers in the background.